WORKERS IN THE DARK.

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WORKERS IN THE DARK

THE GREATEST HANDICAP OF THE BLIND IS THE STUPID ATTITUDE OF THOSE WHO CAN SEE

Not long ago a metropolitan newspaper carried a double-column feature about a young girl who had just completed a 2500-mile trip by bus, alone, from a little town in Arizona to Boston, Massachusetts, where she had come to pursue her studies in one of the country's famous schools.

Ordinarily, such a story would not have been news. But in this instance the girl was blind. The course for which she was enrolling was one in shorthand, typing, business English and dictaphone transcription. Among other things the interview told how Madelene Bleyal, blind from infancy, managed to make the long trek from west to east without guide or companion, using her ears instead of her eyes to find her way about. It told how, after four days and three nights she arrived safely at her destination, happy in her achievement, but happier still in the thought that one day, when she has finished her business course, she will be able to earn her own living and be independent, just like girls who have never known the handicap of blindness.

"Marvelous! Wonderful!" exclaim the seeing public on hearing of such things. "What courage! What ambition!" And then, with moist eyes and shaking heads, invariably they add: "But what a pity; for of course she will never be able to earn her own living. How could she—blind?"

And yet, every morning in a New Jersey city a distinguished grey-haired man boards the train for New York, threads his way through tunneled mazes to the subway, takes a downtown train, and emerging presently, proceeds to his office, where for nine years he has directed the affairs of an organization which employs fifty people. He is a graduate of Harvard University, has a charming wife, travels a great deal, both on business and for pleasure. At his place in the country he enjoys

swimming, boating, tramping and other rural pastimes as keenly as do the many guests who visit his home.

In a newspaper office of a bustling Northern city, a young woman sits at her typewriter pounding out an interview with a visiting celebrity. The girl at the typewriter is a gifted journalist, a Vassar graduate, who has traveled widely in this country and in South America, and speaks Spanish fluently.

In a nationally known bakery a good-looking youth is busy emptying flour-sacks. It is hard work, but he is young and strong, and the job pays him six dollars a day.

Daily in the heart of a Mid-Western metropolis, a young woman enters an office building, runs briskly up a flight of stairs, and takes her place at a desk where she holds an exacting job as typist and dictaphone operator. In the company lounge, where the girls gather at lunch hour and at odd moments throughout the day, she is one of the crowd, chatting with the others about the latest play, the latest book, the latest date. She uses make-up, smokes cigarettes, dresses smartly, dances and plays bridge. In other words, she is a normal, modern girl, interested and active in every phase of the life whirling about her.

All these people are blind, yet without fuss or fanfare they are taking their places in business and in society side by side with their seeing fellows, asking no quarter, expecting no special favors, indulging in no railing against fate —thankful only that they have been given an opportunity to prove their ability to live active, useful happy lives in a world designed primarily for the seeing.

There was a time, less than one hundred and fifty years ago, when to be blind was tragedy indeed. Education of the sightless was unknown. Beggary was the inevitable destiny of the blind poor. But that day has passed forever. For over one hundred years now in the United States the education and rehabilitation of blind individuals has gone steadily forward, always with one object in view—to fit those deprived of sight for normal living among their sighted fellowmen. That these educational efforts have been successful cannot be doubted. A survey made recently by the American Foundation for the Blind reveals that blind men and women are today successfully competing with seeing people in over one hundred occupations, ranging all the way from bee-keeping and

coffee-tasting to college teaching.

To those who are blind, and to those familiar with work among blind people, such facts contain no element of surprise and provide no occasion for adulatory outpourings or emotional hallelujahs. They know that ambition and ability are no special prerogatives of the seeing, and that courage is a quality taken for granted in the blind individual who strives to overcome and to achieve. They rejoice deeply and sincerely with those who have been able to find a place in work and in play in the seeing world. But their rejoicing is tinged with sadness, for they know, too, that these are the lucky ones, and that for every one such, there are scores of other blind, eager *and able* to join the ranks of the self-supporting, who must live out their lives in dependence, insecurity, disappointment and frustration. Not because of their handicap, which can be overcome, but because of the attitude of the seeing public, which, for the most part, still regards the blind as a tragic, isolated class, capable only of a limited manual dexterity, doomed to drag out unhappy lives in sheltered workshops or to eke out meager existences as street musicians or piano tuners.

Mr. A. E. Septinelli, blind from the age of 16, who, with his blind assistant, Stanley Whartenberg, operates the only placement bureau for blind men and women in New York City, at the New York Association for the Blind, says that his big battle is to break down in the minds of potential employers the conviction that blind individuals are incapable of filling certain jobs quite as well as the seeing.

In ten years he has succeeded in placing over 800 blind people in jobs in industry, business and the professions. But it has been uphill work all the way. With somewhat rueful humor he tells of interviewing an executive in an attempt to place one of his very capable blind clients.

"Do you know the one question he asked me?" Mr. Septinelli demanded. "There was no elevator in this particular building, and the one question the employer asked was: But how would a blind man get upstairs? I told him that a blind man gets upstairs like anybody else—he climbs up on two feet!"

To those unfamiliar with the capabilities of blind people, a host of questions similar to that of the unenlightened executive leaps to the mind. How is it possible for blind people to go about alone in

subway, street and office? How can a totally blind stenographer take shorthand notes, transcribe them, and keep her files in order? How can a blind woman keep house—cook, wash, iron, clean her house—without the aid of a sighted person?

Most people, reading of such achievements, jump to the conclusion that the blind possess a sixth sense—a theory that has long since been exploded by scientific workers with the blind. A blind person is no more likely to possess a sixth sense than is a seeing person, and that's pretty unlikely. The ability to move about alone, to "sense" things, which the blind possess, and which to the seeing seems little less than miraculous, is simply and solely the result of an extremely high development of the four senses remaining to the sightless: namely, hearing, touch, smell and taste. And the greatest of these are touch and hearing. The training of these senses, combined with the necessity of depending to so great an extent upon them, develops them to a degree seldom attained by a seeing person. In this, and in the greater power of concentration which most blind people are admitted to have, lies the seeming miracle.

I have watched a blind typist pick out printed—not embossed—letterheads from plain paper on her desk by merely running her fingers along the top and bottom of the sheet. I have seen blind men in assembly plants handling with comparative ease fitting jobs so delicate that seeing workmen had fumbled them hopelessly. I have seen blind women who could thread needles. I have seen blind boys and girls swimming, jumping hurdles and engaging in sports and games with the same zest as the seeing.

Science and invention have been servants of inestimable value in enabling the blind individual of modern times to take his place in business, society and the home, side by side with those who see. Dictaphones and typewriters, which require only the senses of hearing and touch for efficient operation; stenotype machines; switchboards equipped with sound signals instead of lights—all have widened immeasurably the field of potential employment for those deprived of sight. While electric stoves, irons, washing-machines and vacuum sweepers which can be easily operated by touch, have simplified the problem of housekeeping for many blind women.

Braille—the system of reading and writing for the sightless, de-

vised by the blind Frenchman, Louis Braille, in 1829, has, of course, been the greatest single contribution to the intellectual emancipation of blind people the world over. And now we have braille typewriters which greatly facilitate correspondence between blind persons, and braille shorthand machines which are a boon to the blind stenographer.

Radio, obviously, has been of untold value, not only in providing entertainment, but as a means of enabling blind people to keep abreast of the times.

The latest important contribution to the intellectual pleasure and profit of the blind is the Talking Book, developed by the American Foundation for the Blind, through the efforts of Robert B. Irwin, executive director of the Foundation, himself blind from the age of five years. These books consist of sets of long-playing discs, resembling phonograph records, onto which trained readers from stage and radio have recorded much of the best to be had in the way of classic and contemporary books and plays. Packed in stout cartons, the Talking Books are circulated, free of all cost, through twenty-seven regional public libraries throughout the United States. The machines on which the Books are played are manufactured and sold at cost. In the case of blind individuals whose funds do not permit the purchase of the new device, the machines are distributed free, as indefinite loans. This has been made possible through co-operation with the Library of Congress and government appropriations providing for the manufacture of the machines as a WPA project.

Hand in hand with the conviction on the part of the seeing public that blind people are incapable of filling important, or merely useful positions, goes the equally strong, and equally erroneous, conviction that the blind are incapable of mingling socially with those who have their sight. This, of course, is entirely without foundation, and works a cruel hardship on the blind, whose need for companionship and diversion is perhaps even more acute than that of many of the seeing.

The strides made in the past century toward bridging the gulf that separates the lives of those who are blind from those who see have been truly colossal. But there is still one great step to be taken before the blind may enter fully into their rightful place in society —a place for which modern educational and rehabilitation meth-

ods so successfully fit them—and that step must be taken by the seeing public. For until the seeing public ceases once and for all to regard the blind as a class, capable only of being pitied or patronized, just so long must those who are blind stand outside the gates of life, gazing with longing eyes of the spirit into a kingdom from which they are forever exile. The blind are ready, willing, able, and desperately eager to enter into their inheritance of normal, useful happy citizenship. It remains for the seeing to grant or to withhold this priceless good.

For all those interested in hastening the happy day, the following suggestions are offered:

Give the blind an equal break in business and in society. Treat them as you would anyone else. They do not seek special favors, only equal opportunity.

Make a point of including your blind friends in parties and social gatherings. By so doing you will help materially to break down the barrier which so often gives them the feeling of being cut off from normal society.

Always shake hands when meeting or leaving a blind friend, for a handshake is as expressive as the face, and is the substitute for the smile of friendship he cannot see.

Always introduce the blind person to all who are in the room. If he already knows the people, tell him just who is present.

Always be natural with the blind. Don't be patronizing. Remember that the blind person you meet is constituted much the same as you. Ten chances to one he lost his sight after reaching maturity.

Don't refer to blindness as an affliction; it is only a handicap.

Don't exclaim "Wonderful!" or "Marvelous!" simply because a blind person can do quite usual things.

Don't perpetuate an obstinate delusion by crediting the blind with the possession of a sixth sense.

When assisting a blind person across the street, never grasp his arm and push him ahead of you. Let him take your arm. The movement of your body will guide him.

Never talk to a blind person as though he were deaf, or converse with him through a third person.

Don't make unusual revision in conversation to avoid using the word "see" by substituting the word "hear." The blind themselves always say "see." Use the word "blind" without hesitation if you are discussing blindness with persons so handicapped, but don't substitute this topic for the weather! —Enid Griffis

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